


Kids Face Differing Realities In New Orleans Schools

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RENEE MONTAGNE, host:

This is MORNING EDITION from NPR News. Good morning. I'm Renee Montagne.

LINDA WERTHEIMER, host:

And I'm Linda Wertheimer.

We're going to be taking you on a tour of New Orleans today and in the coming days to see how that city is doing five years after Hurricane Katrina.

For many children of that city, their world was turned upside down by the storm. Many were shunted from one house and one school to another. Those who returned to the city found a school system that was in complete upheaval and is still undergoing major changes today.

NPR's Larry Abramson talked with two sons of New Orleans about their experiences.

LARRY ABRAMSON: Donnell Bailey lives in a cozy little row house on St. Ann Street in New Orleans' Mid-City neighborhood. It is a world of doting women, from his grandmother to his aunt to his mother, Tracy, who is quick to show visitors the family photos that cover the coffee table.

Ms. TRACY BAILEY: Yeah, that's our family. That's my mom and my brother. He's in the Marines.

ABRAMSON: The air conditioner battles the afternoon heat as Donnell sits down and tells me what happened in August, 2005. He was 10 years old then, on a fast track to failure, like many kids in the city's corrupt, low-scoring school system. He was held back after failing a fourth-grade achievement test. Donnell admits he wasn't trying, but neither was the neighborhood school.

Mr. DONNELL BAILEY: I don't think I ever heard the word college at that school. I'm like being honest. I'm being honest.

ABRAMSON: All that changed after the storm. Donnell left the city before Katrina arrived, with his Marine uncle and grandmother, and spent the rest of that school year in Houston. Just by chance, Donnell ended up at a school set up in Houston by a national charter organization known as KIPP.

Mr. BAILEY: When I first went to KIPP in the fifth grade in Houston, the first thing that I learned was that I'm going to college in 2013.

ABRAMSON: At first Donnell struggled with the school's stern discipline, with the emphasis on achievement. But something happened. He bonded with his teachers and he started to get some traction.

(Soundbite of noisy children)

Mr. BAILEY: Hello, Ms. Cummins. How's it going?

Ms. NICOLE CUMMINS (Teacher): Give me a real handshake, please. Thank you. How are you?

ABRAMSON: A year after Katrina, Donnell's family returned to New Orleans, and he ended up here, at McDonough 15, a KIPP-run school in the city's French Quarter. Nicole Cummins remembers what Donnell was like when she first taught him.

Ms. CUMMINS: He is really funny. But he didn't quite have a harness on what was appropriate for the classroom.

ABRAMSON: Donnell realized that his impish sense of humor and his love of wordplay could get him attention without getting him in trouble. The misfit became a star. Donnell was elected class president, the same year that Barack Obama was elected to the White House.

Mr. BAILEY: I just have to say, he did take my spot as the country's first African-American president — just saying.

ABRAMSON: Now, you're going to be the first president from New Orleans.

Mr. BAILEY: Yes, and the nation's fully - fully black president. Obama is half-and-half. I'm the total package.

ABRAMSON: Donnell might have succeeded even without Katrina, but it's hard to imagine that. The storm led to the takeover of nearly all the city's schools. It sparked a rush of charter school operators like KIPP. They brought waves of idealistic young educators like Nicole Cummins, who opened new doors to kids like Donnell. But for many other families, Katrina and the new education landscape added new frustrations to old ones.

Mr. RONALD MCCOY: Did you see the ink on (unintelligible)?

Ms. ENIL MCCOY: On the brand new pants I just bought him?

Mr. MCCOY: Yeah, where you're full of ink.

ABRAMSON: On the other side of town, Ronald McCoy and his wife Enil are trying to get ink out their grandson's school uniform.

(Soundbite of scrubbing)

Ms. MCCOY: He loves to work me. Yeah.

(Soundbite of laughter)

ABRAMSON: Their grandson, John Baumbach, is sitting at the dining room table. He's lived with his grandparents since he was a baby. The family says he has attention deficit disorder, and John admits he has a hard time paying attention in school.

Mr. JOHN BAUMBACH: (Unintelligible) sometimes I need extra help with it, like if I don't get it the first time, sometimes it gets hard for me to get it, and sometimes I get off track a lot, æcause I start tapping, because I can't stay in one spot for a lot time because I start fidgeting.

ABRAMSON: Mm-hmm. Like you're doing now?

Mr. BAUMBACH: Yeah.

ABRAMSON: John fiddles constantly with anything he can get his hands on. He's a pretty child, slight with fine features, his hair in neat cornrows. On the wall of the family home, there's a huge portrait of Giani, John's uncle and Ronald's son. Giani was a football star, the pride and joy of the family. He was shot to death in 2007, a victim of the city's high murder rate.

Mr. MCCOY: And it wasn't intended for him. You know, they were shooting at someone else, and the bullet struck him. But Daphne(ph), that's his daughter up on top, the top picture of the little girl graduating. That's the little girl he left behind.

ABRAMSON: The loss of the uncle he idolized is just one of the challenges facing John Baumbach. Before the storm, he had behavior problems at the neighborhood school he attended. John evacuated to Morgan City, Louisiana just before the storm and says he liked his school there. But when the family returned to New Orleans a year later, Ronald McCoy says John's old neighborhood school was suddenly full of security guards and metal detectors.

Mr. MCCOY: And you go in other neighborhoods besides urban neighborhoods, and you don't go through this. You do not go through this at all.

ABRAMSON: This is a common complaint here - that the post-Katrina school system has relied too heavily on security guards and harsh discipline in the relentless quest to boost test scores. The new school system is supposed to give parents choice, a menu of charters, magnet schools and traditional public schools. But Ronald McCoy says everywhere they turn, his grandson's issues are neglected. A Kipp charter school, like the one Donnell Bailey attended, recruited them. But they say John never got the individual attention they were promised.

Mr. MCCOY: It was lip service. It was really lip service, you know, because they're dealing with really trying to get kids into their school. I don't have no problem with being straight, but when it gets to the point where it's like a concentration camp, I do have a problem.

ABRAMSON: Other parents have the same complaint, that New Orleans schools have ignored special education issues like John's. That led to a recent legal complaint by a civil rights group here.

Samuel J. Green Charter is John's third school since Katrina. As he begins 8th grade here, his future is

uncertain.

Mr. BAUMBACH: I'm showing (unintelligible) the tape, how the tape on the ground, how we have to walk û because we have to stay on the right side of the wall.

ABRAMSON: After class, John shows his grandfather a recent addition - the halls have narrow lines of tape along each side of the hallway. Kids must stay on the tape, even if that doubles the distance to the next classroom.

Mr. MCCOY: This walking this line, like I say, I have been incarcerated and that's the way I learned about walking behind those lines and staying on the right-hand side of the wall.

ABRAMSON: It's the first day of school for Donnell Bailey. He's in his second year at a private school in the suburbs of New Orleans - his Kipp school recommended him, and Metairie Park Country Day School is helping to cover his tuition costs here. He's brand new to this mostly-white private school, but still he was elected class president at the end of last year.

Last year you were brand new?

Mr. BAILEY: Yeah, it's û you know, it's welcoming. A lot of people are calling me president now, so it's cool.

ABRAMSON: For Donnell Bailey, the post-Katrina reality is very cool, a brand new chapter in a young life. For many others, it's the same old story.

Larry Abramson, NPR News.

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